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ABSTRACT

One hundred sixteen students enrolled at two midwestern universities in neighboring states completed a 28-item Student Perceptions of Evaluations Questionnaire to determine students' attitudes towards the evaluation process. Four central questions to be answered were: (1) Do students understand how evaluations are used? (2) What are students' misperceptions about evaluations? (3) Do students take the opportunity to evaluate their professors seriously? (4) Do students think that professors take students' comments seriously? Results of the survey showed that students often did not know how or for what purpose the evaluations were to be used. They were also uncertain as to whether such evaluations were used in determining pay raises and/or promotions. Students indicated that they do take teaching evaluations seriously despite their uncertainty about whether professors take the evaluations seriously. It appeared that student ratings are not significantly undermined by their incomplete knowledge of the process or their uncertainty regarding how professors felt about the evaluations, but providing students with information about the uses of teaching evaluations would help reduce cynicism and improve lines of communication between students and their professors. Contains nine references. (GLR)

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Students' Perceptions of the Teaching Evaluation Process

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Introduction

Most professors are familiar with the cynical attitude held by many students toward end-of-the-semester teaching evaluations--an attitude that professors themselves may inadvertently promote. Such evaluations are often administered haphazardly, and their subsequent use may be unknown to the student. Given this situation, four questions come to mind: (a) Do students understand how evaluations are used? (b) If not, what is the nature of their misconceptions? (c) Do they take the opportunity to evaluate their professors seriously? and (d) Do students believe that professors consider seriously students' comments and use the feedback students provide? We will return to these questions later in this paper.

Much research has accumulated over the past two decades concerning issues of validity and reliability of evaluation instruments (e.g., Aubrecht, 1981; Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971; Marsh, 1984). More specifically, a limited number of studies have been conducted in which students' knowledge of the uses of teaching evaluations (e.g., improvement of teaching vs. salary/promotion/tenure considerations) was manipulated (for a review, see Feldman, 1979). It appears that informing students that teaching evaluations will be used for "official" salary, promotion, and tenure considerations tends to produce more favorable ratings than if they are told the purpose is for instructor feedback and course improvement. However, across studies, the advantage has tended to be fairly small, and not always in this direction. More positive ratings have been interpreted by some as reflecting a leniency error (e.g., Wherry, 1952). However, Feldman (1979) points out that another explanation is possible.

Hypothetically, when students are informed that teaching evaluations are to be used for official purposes, students may be less biased in their ratings. That is, students rate in a more responsible manner, as opposed to venting "personal animosities" toward the professor. Thus, how students' knowledge of the process affects the validity of teaching evaluation ratings remains an open question. Further, apart from knowledge per se, beliefs which students hold may play a role in ratings. Research and theory in other areas demonstrate clearly how beliefs guide actions and influence judgments (Azjen & Fishbein, 1973; Bentler & Speckhart, 1979).

An examination of students' perceptions of the evaluation process is important. Teaching evaluations completed by students do count, and students should be made aware of this. How seriously they complete the evaluation may be a function of their knowledge of the evaluations' uses, and their belief that changes may be made as a result of their ratings and comments. Such knowledge and beliefs may affect the resultant reliability and validity of the evaluation instrument's administration. Further, examining students' perceptions may inform us about how to educate students to the importance of this task and serve to open lines of communication between students and their professors.

Finally, recent articles and books in the popular press have advocated a "caveat emptor" approach to higher education. These articles suggest that students may not be getting their money's worth because professors devote more time to research than to teaching (see, for example, Profscam by Charles Sykes). Such attitudes make it imperative that we learn more

about how students feel regarding the opportunities they are given to "sound off" about conditions in the university classroom. To this end, a questionnaire was developed as a first step toward an examination of students' perceptions of the evaluation process.

Method

Instrument

The basic version of the Student Perceptions of Evaluations Questionnaire (SPEQ) consisted of 28 items (see Table 1, items 1-26, 29, 30). These items queried students about the utility of evaluations and assessed their knowledge of how evaluations are used. Students indicated agreement via a 5-point Likert-type scale, with rating choices as follows: "1" (strongly disagree), "2" (disagree), "3" (uncertain), "4" (agree), and "5" (strongly agree). In addition, three specific open-ended questions allowed students to provide more information regarding the utility of teaching evaluations (see Table 2). Demographic information was also gathered. Twenty-one students had completed a pilot version. Consequently, the SPEQ was revised--certain items were reworded, and others dropped due to redundancy. The resulting 28 items (plus the three specific open-ended items) were then administered to the students as described below.[1]

Subjects

One hundred sixteen students completed the SPEQ during the Fall and Spring semesters, 1988 and 1989. Of these, 57 were enrolled in an introductory educational psychology class, and 59 were enrolled an educational foundations class, at two midwestern universities in neighboring states. There were 18 males and 98 females in the combined

samples, and the mean age was 21.5 years. Students were volunteers and some received extra course credit for participation.

Initially, students were given a brief introduction which stated that there were no "correct" answers, and that the purpose was simply to learn what they knew about teaching evaluations as well as their opinions of the evaluation process. There was no time limit on completing the questionnaire.

Results

Mean responses were determined for each item on the SPEQ, and were utilized to determine student opinions. Standard rounding rules were followed to determine whether students agreed, disagreed, or were uncertain about a statement. Examination of the data indicated consistent ratings between the two universities. Results for individual items are shown in Table 1. Coefficient alpha was used to estimate internal reliability, and item correlation matrix was also obtained. Let us now return to the four questions posed earlier. Specific questionnaire items are identified in parenthesis.

Four Central Questions

Do students' understand how evaluations are used? On average, students were uncertain if evaluations are used in determining pay raises (#18a) and promotions (#18b) for professors, but did agree that evaluations are used by professors to make improvements in both courses (#18c) and the professor's teaching style (#18d).

Students' responses about how evaluations should be used indicated sensitivity to the fact that teaching is a human endeavor. Students agreed

that a professor who consistently receives poor evaluations should get instruction in effective teaching (#12b). They were uncertain, however, if such professors should be fired (#12a) or demoted (#12d). Students disagreed that professors should get a pay cut (#12c), should not teach the same course again (#12e), or should only do research (#12f).

What are students' misperceptions about evaluations? Only one general misperception could be detected from the students' mean ratings. Students agreed that they should have more influence in the evaluation of their professors (#6). This appears to reflect a belief that they have little influence, when in fact, their evaluations can have considerable impact.

Do students take the opportunity to evaluate their professors seriously? Students agreed that evaluations are useful (#1), important (#4), and reported that they take evaluations seriously (#2). This was also reflected in their agreement that the evaluation process should be improved (#7). Regarding the personal qualities of professors which might impact upon students' evaluations, students agreed that enthusiastic, humorous, and friendly teachers receive the highest evaluations (#14). Nevertheless, they disagreed that they would routinely give a poor teacher a good evaluation just because they liked him/her (#13). Students believe that summaries of evaluations should be available for students to examine when selecting courses (#26)--an indication of the importance they attach to this information.

Do students think that professors take evaluations seriously? As reported above, students did believe that evaluations are used to make

improvements in course content (#18c) and teaching methods (#18d). Nevertheless, the manner in which these improvements took place was unclear. Students indicated uncertainty about whether professors used evaluations to improve their courses by revising examinations or changing grading procedures and policies (#9).

Other responses indicated further uncertainity about professors' use of evaluations. Students were uncertain if professors take their evaluations seriously (#25), or do not care about students' evaluations of them (#19). They agreed that the professor's teaching ability is reflected by the overall performance of the class (#5) and not their own ability to learn the material (#20). Students disagreed that most of the general population of university professors were good teachers (#29), and were relatively unsure of whether or not the majority of the professors at their respective universities were "good" teachers (#30).

Open-ended Questions

Three specific open-ended questions, positioned at the end of the questionnaire, gave students the opportunity to respond in writing. A summary of the content of their comments appears in Table 2.

Correlational Data

Internal reliability was calculated via coefficient alpha to be .55. Given the diversity of the items on the instrument, this moderate value was not unexpected.

An examination of the item correlation matrix yielded some degree of consistency among logically related items. For example, it is informative to examine those SPEQ items which correlated significantly ($p < .01$ or

smaller) with item 2: "I take seriously the opportunity to evaluate my professors." From the correlational matrix, one may conclude that students who take the evaluation process seriously feel it is both a useful (#1) and important (#4) practice. They also expressed some cynicism, by agreeing with the statement "Professors are more friendly near the end of the semester so that they will get better evaluations from students" (#21). Finally, they felt that the professor's ability to teach the material played a role in their course grade [vs. just the student's ability] (#2).

Summary and Discussion

As initially stated, the uses made of faculty teaching evaluations are often unknown to the student--who may consequently view the process as a perfunctory exercise of little impact. If this is the student's viewpoint, one may question how seriously he or she completes the evaluation. This, in turn, may jeopardize the reliability and validity of the ratings. The SPEQ was developed as an initial step toward investigating what students know and believe about the teaching evaluation process.

In terms of general knowledge, the students in our studies knew that one purpose of the teaching evaluation process was to make teaching/course improvements. However, they were uncertain as to whether such evaluations were used in determining pay raises and/or promotions. Surely, such information needs to be shared with students, so that they are aware of the full impact of their evaluations. Such information might help to assuage the students' misperception that they have little influence via their ratings.

In spite of their uncertainity about whether professors take teaching evaluations seriously, students themselves believe the evaluations are important, useful, and do take them seriously. This seems to support research findings, which suggest that teaching evaluations are generally reliable, valid, and unaffected by potential biases (e.g., Marsh, 1987)--in contrast to the negative "myths" about student ratings frequently held by faculty members (e.g., Cohen, 1989). Nevertheless, one would expect even more reliable and valid ratings from students if they knew that their ratings would have an effect (e.g., merit pay, promotion, etc.).

Thus, it appears that students' ratings are not significantly undermined by students' incomplete knowledge of the process, nor by their uncertainty regarding whether professors take their ratings seriously. However, it remains important to educate students about the uses of teaching evaluations. Their lack of knowledge contributes to the cynicism which they--and perhaps the public at large--feel toward the work university professors are doing as teachers. Faculty members are held accountable for their teaching in several ways. Providing such information to students would help reduce cynicism, and improve lines of communication between students and their professors.

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Footnote

[1]On the last administration of the SPEQ, items 27, 28, and 31 were added (n = 28). For all other items, n = 116.

Table 1
Items and Mean Ratings on the SPEQ

Items	Mean Rating
1. The evaluation of university professors is a useful thing to do.	4.1
2. I take seriously the opportunity to evaluate my professors.	4.3
3. Professors use students' evaluations to improve their courses.	3.1
4. Providing feedback to my professors is an important part of the educational process for me.	3.6
5. A professor's teaching ability is directly reflected by the overall performance of the students in his/her class.	3.7
6. Students should have more influence in the evaluations of their professors.	3.9
7. The evaluation process of university professors should be improved.	3.7
8. Department chairpersons and college deans read students' evaluations, but only give them to the professor if they are good.	2.3
9. Professors often use students' evaluations to improve their courses by, for example, revising examinations or changing grading policies.	2.9
10. Students' evaluations of professors should be confidential information.	4.2
11. If a professor really wanted to know which student(s) gave him or her a poor evaluation, it would be easy for the professor to find out.	2.4
12. If a professor consistently receives poor evaluations of his/her teaching from students, the appropriate course of action would be to:	
(a) Fire the professor.	2.7
(b) Require him/her to receive instruction in "effective teaching."	4.0
(c) Give the professor a cut in pay.	2.5
(d) Give the professor a demotion (e.g., from "full" to "associate").	2.6
(e) Not allow the professor to teach the course again.	2.8
(f) Allow the professor to perform research but not to teach.	2.6
13. I always give a professor a good evaluation if I like him/her, even if I think that he/she is a poor teacher.	1.7
14. Professors who are enthusiastic, humorous, and friendly get the best evaluations.	3.5
15. It is more important for the professor to be an "expert" on a topic than it is for him/her to present interesting lectures.	2.1
16. Evaluating older, tenured professors is a waste of time because they are "set in their ways."	3.0
17. Most university professors are good teachers.	2.4
18. Students' evaluations are used to:	
(a) Give professors pay raises based on teaching abilty (merit).	3.0
(b) Make decisions about the promotion and tenure of professors.	3.2
(c) Make improvements in courses (e.g., more interesting topics).	3.5
(d) Make improvements in the professor's teaching method or style.	3.5

Table 1--continued
Items and Mean Ratings on the SPEQ

Items	Mean Ratings
19. Most professors don't care about students' evaluations of their teaching ability.	2.7
20. The grade I receive in a course reflects my ability to learn the material and not the professor's ability to teach the material.	2.5
21. Professors are more friendly near the end of the semester so that they will get better evaluations from students.	3.0
22. Evaluations should be given near the middle of the semester rather than at the end when everyone is happy to be finishing.	3.2
23. I am generally satisfied with the opportunity that I am given to evaluate my professors.	3.6
24. I would not like to become a university professor.	3.2
25. How seriously do you think the majority of your professors take students' evaluations? (not at all seriously, don't care, indifferent, seriously, very seriously)	3.1
26. There should be a summary of students' evaluations of individual professors available for students to help them select "good" or "excellent" teachers for their classes.	3.7
27. Students typically evaluate a professor on the basis of his/her personality and attractiveness.*	2.6
28. Professors use students' evaluations to improve their courses by:	
(a) Adopting students' suggestions, changes in grading, new topics, etc.*	2.9
(b) Making changes to meet students' needs (e.g., fewer assignments).*	2.8
(c) Making topics more "relevant," interesting, challenging, or fun.*	3.4
29. I would rate a large proportion of the general population of university professors as: (awful, poor, fair, good, excellent teachers)	3.5
30. I would rate a large proportion of the professors at ____ as: (awful, poor, fair, good, excellent teachers)	3.6
31. Among the most valid criteria for evaluating a professor's teaching ability are:	
(a) being an "expert" on the subject s/he is teaching.*	3.5
(b) being an interesting speaker who holds students' attention.*	4.2
(c) challenging students to think in a critical way about issues.*	4.3
(d) using lots of audio-visual materials (movies, videos, etc.).*	3.1
(e) being organized, clear, and thorough in his/her lectures.*	4.5
(f) using a fair system for examinations and evaluating students.*	4.4
(g) being a "warm" person who encourages and motivates students.*	4.2
(h) demonstrating enjoyment of the subject matter.*	4.3

*Note. These items were added to the instrument on the last administration (n = 28) of the SPEQ.

Table 2
Summary of Student Responses to Open-Ended Questions

32. In what ways do you think the evaluation process could be more useful?

--if they really carried a lot of weight
--show students that it's not a waste of time
--more space on form to make suggestions
--let students see results of evaluations--provide direct feedback regarding what actually happens
--let students see previous evaluations to make informed choices regarding class selection
--do evaluations at both middle and end of the semester, or periodically through-out the semester
--administration of evaluations needs to be done more carefully
--require professors to make changes based on students' comments

33. If you believe that evaluations are not taken seriously by students OR professors, why do you think that this is so?

--no changes in teaching were observed; professors are set in their ways; students think their comments have no effect on teaching style
--no evidence seen that teachers take them seriously
--not enough time given for evaluations to be comnpleted, so students have to rush through them
--students see professors consistently receive poor evaluations, yet they are still teaching
--those who complete evaluations are angry at professors for one reason or another; students who like professors do not fill out evaluations

34. How could your professors be more helpful to you in understanding the use of teaching evaluations?

--stress importance of truthful answers
--give students examples of how professors have used evaluations to improve teaching methods
--professors need to change content, style of courses to reflect students' desires; generally "take to heart" what students are telling them; students want to know that their feedback is worthwhile
--explain how the process work; how promotions and pay raises are instituted
--explain what happens once evaluations leave students' hands
--inform students that they (the professors) are open to suggestions/comments